

# Perceptions of Gay, Lesbian, and Heterosexual Domestic Violence Among Undergraduates in Sweden

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An experimental study of perceptions about gay, lesbian, and heterosexual domestic violence in Sweden. Undergraduate students ( $N = 1009$ ) read one of eight fictitious scenarios of domestic violence in married couple relationships, where sexual orientation, sex of victim and batterer, and severity of violence were varied. Perceptions of seriousness of the described incident and attitudes toward women, gays and lesbians were measured. Domestic violence was perceived as more serious in cases where: the respondent was a woman, the batterer was a man, the victim was a woman, or the battering was severe. Wife-battering in a heterosexual relationship was considered the most serious case in both the less and more severe battering scenario. Where battering was less severe, domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships was perceived as more serious than heterosexual husband-battering; this difference disappeared in the severe battering scenario. Negative attitudes toward gays, lesbians, and women were associated with less concern about domestic violence in all types of relationships. The findings suggest that stereotypes about gays, lesbians, and women affect perceptions of domestic violence, but mainly when violence is less severe.

While there is a significant body of research on public attitudes toward, and perceptions of, domestic violence in heterosexual relationships (Capezza and Arriaga 2008; Harris and Cook 1994; Locke and Richman 1999; Pierce and Harris 1993; Sorenson and Taylor 2005; Taylor and Sorenson 2005), the literature on perceptions of domestic or intimate partner violence in gay and lesbian relationships is limited to only a handful of studies (Brown and Groscup 2009; Harris and Cook 1994; Poorman, Seelau, and Seelau 2003; Seelau and Seelau 2005; Seelau, Seelau, and Poorman 2003; Sorenson and Thomas 2009). The lack of such research means that policy-makers and other decision-makers lack the basic knowledge and understanding about domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships required for designing evidence-based interventions to prevent domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships and to

support men and women who are victims of domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships. This study seeks to expand this knowledge. As is conventional in the literature, we use the term “gay” for homosexual men and “lesbian” for homosexual women.

The purpose of this study is to examine perceptions of domestic violence in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual married couple relations. Sweden is an interesting place to study this issue. Swedish public opinion about gay and lesbian relationships is among the most liberal and tolerant in the world (Gerhards 2010). Compared to many other countries, gay and lesbian people can live their lives openly in Sweden, where the law gives them the same privileges and opportunities as others. There has, therefore, been a growing interest in studying the lives of gay and lesbian people

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in Sweden (see, e.g., Ahmed, Andersson, and Hammarstedt 2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2013a, 2013b; Ahmed and Hammarstedt 2009, 2010; Andersson et al. 2006; Bergmark 1999; Rydström 2008; Rödahl, Innala, and Carlsson 2004). In 1995, gay and lesbian couples in Sweden were allowed to enter into civil unions and since 2009 gay and lesbian couples have been allowed to marry, which gave them the same legal rights and obligations as married heterosexuals. This cultural and legal environment is advantageous for studying perceptions of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual domestic violence, since the concept of gay and lesbian marriage is broadly accepted, and thus the possibility of gay and lesbian domestic violence is understood.

The study addressed four research questions:

- I. Are perceptions of gay and lesbian domestic violence different from perceptions of heterosexual domestic violence?
- II. Are there gender differences in the perception of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual domestic violence?
- III. Do perceptions of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual domestic violence vary in relation to the severity of the assault?
- IV. Are perceptions of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual domestic violence affected by attitudes toward gays, lesbians, and women?

An experimental methodology was used. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of eight fictitious scenarios about domestic violence in married couple relationships. The specific information was tailored to answering the research questions. After participants had read the story, they answered a set of questions that measured their perceptions of the domestic violence described. Finally, their attitudes towards women, gays, and lesbians were measured, followed by some demographic questions. This analysis focuses on heterosexual perceptions since the present sample consisted predominantly of heterosexual individuals.

## 1. Background and Hypotheses

### 1.1. Prior Findings

Based on previous findings on intimate partner violence in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual relationships, we expected

that the sex of the respondent, the sex of the victim, and the sex of the batterer would affect perceptions of domestic violence (Brown and Groscup 2009; Harris and Cook 1994; Poorman, Seelau, and Seelau 2003; Seelau and Seelau 2005; Seelau, Seelau, and Poorman 2003; Sorenson and Thomas 2009). Harris and Cook (1994) were the first to examine perceptions of domestic violence in both heterosexual and gay relationships. They studied college students' reactions to domestic violence in three cases: a husband battering his wife, a wife battering her husband, and a gay man battering his lover (but excluded the case of a lesbian relationship). Their results showed that respondents regarded wife-battering as more serious than husband-battering. The reactions to domestic violence involving gay lovers were somewhat less clear and were ranked between the reactions to wife-battering and husband-battering. Their results also showed that female respondents reacted more negatively than male respondents to domestic violence, regardless of the sex of batterer and victim.

Seelau, Seelau, and Poorman (2003) asked undergraduate students to read a story about a domestic violence case, in which the sex of victim and batterer was varied and included domestic violence in a lesbian relationship. They found that the participants considered battering of women to be more serious than battering of men regardless of the batterer's sex and the sexual orientation of the couple. Again, female participants showed greater levels of concern than male participants.

Poorman, Seelau, and Seelau (2003), Seelau and Seelau (2005), and Sorenson and Thomas (2009) all found that the victim's sex affected respondents' perceptions of domestic violence more than their sexual orientation. The case where a man battered a woman was considered most serious by respondents in studies by Poorman, Seelau, and Seelau (2003) and Seelau and Seelau (2005), while the case where a woman battered a man was considered least serious by respondents in the study by Sorenson and Thomas (2009). Brown and Groscup (2009), however, report that crisis center staff considered domestic violence in same-sex relationships less serious than domestic violence in opposite-sex relationships.

## 1.2. Hypotheses

Previous research has consistently shown that women are more likely than men to sympathize with the victim, regardless of the sex of batterer or victim (Harris and Cook 1994; Home 1994; Pierce and Harris 1993; Seelau, Seelau, and Poorman 2003; Stalans 1996; Summers and Feldman 1984). We therefore predicted that the perceiver's sex would influence perceptions of domestic violence in all types of relationships, with female respondents finding domestic violence more serious than male respondents (Hypothesis 1).

Gender-role stereotypes that regard men as stronger and more likely to be batterers and women as more vulnerable and more likely to be victims should lead to perceptions of domestic violence being more serious when the batterer is a man, the victim is a woman, or both (Seelau, Seelau, and Poorman 2003). We predicted that perceived seriousness should be greatest when both elements are present (male batterer, female victim), and least when neither are present (female batterer, male victim). Accordingly, we predicted that respondents would perceive domestic violence as most serious when a husband abuses his wife (Hypothesis 2). This has been a consistent finding in studies on domestic violence in heterosexual relationships (Feather 1996; Gerber 1991; Harris and Cook 1994; Home 1994; Willis, Hallinan, and Melby 1996). We further predicted that domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships would be perceived as more serious where one of these elements (male batterer or female victim) is present than in heterosexual relationships where a wife abuses her husband (Hypothesis 3).

Capezza and Arriaga (2008) found that the level of physical aggression significantly affected participants' perceptions of domestic violence. We included two levels of domestic violence in our study: a more severe and a less severe situation. We predicted that any differences in perceptions based on sex or sexual orientation of batterer and victim would be smaller in the case of more severe abuse (Hypothesis 4). We expected that when the violence is less severe, respondents will find it serious in only certain cases (in particular husband battering wife). However, if the violence is more severe, involving brutal battering, the bat-

terer's behavior will be perceived as serious regardless of the sex of the victim or the batterer.

Finally, we expected that prejudices against gay and lesbian people would be associated with lower perceived seriousness of domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships compared to heterosexual relationships. Accordingly, respondents would perceive domestic violence as more serious in a heterosexual relationship than in a gay or lesbian relationship. This is a competing prediction to those based on gender-role stereotypes presented earlier (Hypotheses 2 and 3). In order to evaluate these competing predictions we therefore also measured our respondents' attitudes towards gays and lesbians. We predicted that people with negative attitudes to gays and lesbians would perceive domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships to be less serious than domestic violence in heterosexual relationships (Hypothesis 5).

## 1.3. Contribution

Our study makes several contributions to the literature. It is to our knowledge the first study to address perceptions about domestic violence within *married* gay and lesbian couples. Since the concept of gay and lesbian marriage is unfamiliar in many countries, previous research has compared perceptions of domestic violence in non-marital gay and lesbian relationships with domestic violence in heterosexual marital relationships (Harris and Cook 1994). This type of comparison and analysis obviously confounds gender constellation and legal status of the relationship. Other studies have therefore focused on intimate partner violence (rather than domestic violence) in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual relationships (Poorman, Seelau, and Seelau 2003; Seelau, Seelau, and Poorman 2003; Seelau and Seelau 2005; Sorenson and Thomas 2009; Taylor and Sorenson 2005). Second, as far as we know this is the first study on perceptions pertaining to domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships in Sweden. As mentioned before, Sweden is comparatively tolerant of gay and lesbian lifestyles. Conducting research on domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships in a more tolerant country is important for future cross-cultural comparisons. Third, this study examines how severity of violence influences perceptions of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual domestic viol-

ence. And finally, the study also examined the role of attitudes towards gay and lesbian people in forming perceptions about domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 1,074 undergraduate students at Linnaeus University in Sweden were recruited to participate in the study. Sixty-five cases had to be excluded due to missing data. Hence, the analysis is based on 1,009 participants, of whom 575 were female and 434 were male. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 59 years ( $M = 25$ ,  $SD = 8.11$ ). Four hundred and fifty-eight participants were single and 551 had a partner. One hundred and fifty-three participants were parents. The vast majority, 990, were heterosexuals; two were gay or lesbian, twelve were bisexual, and five reported other sexual orientations. One hundred and ninety-seven participants reported that they had experienced some form of abuse in their life, while sixty-seven reported that they had been perpetrators in an incidence of abuse. A preliminary analysis of participants' characteristics showed that besides sex, none of the other characteristics were significantly related to our dependent variable and the composition of participants in different experimental conditions was not statistically different. These characteristics will, therefore, not be analyzed further. Descriptive statistics and composition of participants in different experimental conditions are presented in Table A1 in the Appendix.

### 2.2. Scenarios and Instruments

All materials used in this study were pre-tested on seventeen faculty administrators to optimize for wording, clarity, appropriateness, feasibility, and time.

#### 2.2.1. Domestic Violence Scenarios

Each participant read a fictitious domestic violence scenario adapted from the work of Kristiansen and Giulietti (1990). Information about the victim's sex (male or female), the batterer's sex (male or female), and the severity of the violence (less and more severe) was varied. Each participant was randomly assigned to read one of eight possible versions. The scenario was written so that it would

be consistent with any of the eight situations. The text of the scenario for the case in which a lesbian woman abuses her wife with less severe violence is cited by way of illustration:

On March 17, 2010, the police received a telephone call reporting an incident of marital violence. Upon arrival at the residence where the violence had occurred, police conducted interviews with the two married women. It became clear that Anna, a 48-year-old saleswoman in the electronics industry, had come home from work around 7 p.m. Her 46-year-old wife, Maria, was already home, but no children. Maria had come home from her work as an accountant at 6 p.m., about one hour later than normal. As Maria had got home from work late and had not had time to shop on the way, she had chosen to prepare the leftovers from the previous day's dinner. After setting the table and putting the food in the oven, Maria went into the living room to watch TV. When Anna came home at 7 p.m., she asked Maria what she had prepared for supper. Maria replied that she had been delayed at work, had not had time to do the shopping, and had therefore prepared the leftovers from the previous day's dinner. When Anna heard this, she became upset and said that Maria should begin to prioritize the family and should not always put her work first.

Maria then went into the kitchen to continue preparing the evening meal. Anna came after her and talked to her in an even angrier tone. In the kitchen Anna grabbed Maria's arm and gave her two sharp slaps, the second of which knocked Maria to the floor. Anna left the house, but returned just before the police arrived.

In the more severe case of violence the last paragraph was replaced by the following:

Maria then went into the kitchen to continue preparing the evening meal. Anna came after her and talked to her in an even angrier tone. In the kitchen Anna grabbed Maria's arm and gave her two powerful punches, the second of which knocked her to the floor. Anna gave her a couple of kicks when she was already down and then took the floor lamp and used it to repeatedly hit Maria's upper body. When Maria eventually stood up, Anna threw a glass bowl that cut a large gash in Maria's forehead and smashed on the kitchen floor. Anna then screamed that she would kill Maria and chased her out of the house. Maria was forced to seek protection in the neighboring house. When the police arrived, however, both Maria and Anna had returned to their house, where the next-door couple was now present as well.

After reading the scenario, participants responded to nine items measuring their perceptions about the domestic violence, adapted from Pierce and Harris (1993). The measures

were translated into Swedish and adjusted in wording and formulation to accommodate the Swedish context and our participants. The nine items comprised three concerning the incident itself, three concerning the batterer, and three concerning the victim. They were all rated on a scale ranging from (1) to (7). The complete texts (translated into English) appear in Table A2 in the Appendix. Total scores ranged from 9 to 63 with higher scores reflecting respondents perceiving the scenario as more serious and being more concerned about the situation described. The total score of these nine dependent measures was used as the main dependent variable in our analysis. We called this the Opinion of Domestic Violence Scale (ODVS). The internal consistency for the ODVS was .79.

### 2.2.2. Attitude Measures

After completing the items that measured perceptions of the domestic violence scenario, participants completed a survey packet that contained the short version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS) adapted from Spence and Hahn (1997), the short version of the Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG) adapted from Herek and Capitanio (1995), and some demographic and other questions. Both the AWS and the ATLG were translated into Swedish and then back into English and compared with the original version in order to avoid discrepancies. The AWS contained fourteen items on a scale from (1) to (7).<sup>1</sup> Items included statements such as “Swearing and obscenity are more repulsive in the speech of a woman than a man.” The AWS also included some reverse-coded items, such as: “Women should assume their rightful place in business and all the professions along with men.” The total scores ranged from 14 to 98, with higher scores reflecting more negative attitudes about women. For the present sample, the internal consistency was .79.

The ATLG comprised six items on a seven-point scale. Three items were about gays and three about lesbians. The items about gays (lesbians) were: “Sex between two men

(women) is just plain wrong,” “I think male (female) homosexuals are disgusting,” and “Male (Female) homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in men (women).” Total scores ranged between 6 and 42, with higher scores reflecting more negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians. The internal consistency for the ATLG was .87.

### 2.3. Procedure

The experiment was conducted during spring 2011 at Linnaeus University in Växjö. The Scientific Review Board of the Swedish Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority approved the procedures. Subjects volunteered to participate and were informed that the purpose of the study was to study perceptions of domestic violence. Sessions were conducted in a classroom with approximately twenty-five to fifty participants per session. Participants were seated in such a way that that concerns about being observed would not affect their responses. After an introduction, participants were given a questionnaire packet that contained all the survey materials. They were told to read the story and complete the questionnaire at their own pace. Sessions lasted up to 45 minutes. After the session, the experimenters thanked, paid, and debriefed the participants. All participants received cinema vouchers, worth 300 Swedish Krona, as compensation.<sup>2</sup> Confidentiality was ensured.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Perceptions of Domestic Violence

The possible range for the dependent variable ODVS, perceived seriousness of domestic violence, was 9 to 63 and the mean for the total sample was 54.36 ( $SD = 7.21$ ). Higher scores reflected perception of a scenario as more serious and greater concern about the described situation. Data were submitted to a 2 (respondent's sex)  $\times$  2 (batterer's sex)  $\times$  2 (victim's sex)  $\times$  2 (violence severity) analysis of variance (ANOVA). The means and standard deviations from this analysis are presented in Table 1. The analysis revealed eight significant results.

<sup>1</sup> The original AWS in Spence and Hahn (1997) contained fifteen items. We excluded one that did not apply to the Swedish context: “It is insulting to women to have the ‘obey’ clause remain in the marriage service.”

<sup>2</sup> SEK 300 was equivalent to about €32 or \$43 at the time of the experiment.



**Table 1: Mean Opinion of Domestic Violence Scale (ODVS) scores, standard deviations, and Ns for participants in different conditions**

		Female respondent		Male respondent	
		Female victim	Male victim	Female victim	Male victim
Low severity	Female batterer	$M = 52.29$	$M = 49.62$	$M = 48.18$	$M = 45.63$
		$SD = 5.93$	$SD = 6.53$	$SD = 5.94$	$SD = 6.60$
		$N = 78$	$N = 66$	$N = 50$	$N = 59$
	Male batterer	$M = 56.18$	$M = 51.31$	$M = 53.08$	$M = 48.22$
		$SD = 4.65$	$SD = 5.74$	$SD = 5.54$	$SD = 6.89$
		$N = 77$	$N = 75$	$N = 52$	$N = 50$
High severity	Female batterer	$M = 57.20$	$M = 58.00$	$M = 54.21$	$M = 56.83$
		$SD = 6.68$	$SD = 5.13$	$SD = 7.98$	$SD = 5.48$
		$N = 71$	$N = 72$	$N = 52$	$N = 58$
	Male batterer	$M = 60.74$	$M = 57.66$	$M = 60.75$	$M = 56.77$
		$SD = 3.30$	$SD = 5.45$	$SD = 2.42$	$SD = 6.89$
		$N = 65$	$N = 71$	$N = 60$	$N = 53$

Note: Total ODVS scores ranged from 9 to 63, with higher scores reflecting respondents perceiving the scenario as more serious and being more concerned about the situation described.

First, all four main effects were statistically significant. The perceived seriousness was significantly higher among female respondents ( $M = 55.32$ ,  $SD = 6.54$ ) than among male respondents ( $M = 53.09$ ,  $SD = 7.86$ ),  $F(1, 993) = 42.95$ ,  $p < .001$ , supporting Hypothesis 1. The perceived seriousness was significantly lower when the batterer was a woman ( $M = 52.98$ ,  $SD = 7.56$ ) than when the batterer was a man ( $M = 55.75$ ,  $SD = 7.56$ ),  $F(1, 993) = 59.46$ ,  $p < .001$ . The perceived seriousness was significantly higher when the victim was a woman ( $M = 55.54$ ,  $SD = 6.70$ ) than when the victim was a man ( $M = 53.18$ ,  $SD = 7.52$ ),  $F(1, 993) = 39.71$ ,  $p < .001$ . In combination, these findings are consistent with Hypotheses 2 and 3. Not surprisingly, the last main effect showed that the perceived seriousness was significantly higher in the more severe case ( $M = 57.86$ ,  $SD = 5.90$ ) than in the less severe case ( $M = 50.89$ ,  $SD = 6.70$ ),  $F(1, 993) = 381.85$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Second, four interaction effects were statistically significant. There was a significant interaction between respondent's sex and violence severity,  $F(1, 993) = 9.86$ ,  $p = .002$ . Closer inspection of this interaction revealed that this result was driven by the difference in perceived seriousness

between female and male respondents being larger in the less severe scenario than in the more severe scenario, which supports Hypothesis 4. In the less severe scenario, the mean ODVS score for female respondents ( $M = 52.46$ ,  $SD = 6.18$ ) was 3.78 units higher than for male respondents ( $M = 48.68$ ,  $SD = 6.81$ ),  $t(505) = 6.50$ ,  $p < .001$ . In the more severe scenario, the mean ODVS score for female respondents ( $M = 58.35$ ,  $SD = 5.46$ ) was only 1.09 units higher than for male respondents ( $M = 57.26$ ,  $SD = 6.37$ ),  $t(500) = 2.06$ ,  $p = .040$ .

The other three significant interactions were between the batterer's sex and the victim's sex,  $F(1, 993) = 25.77$ ,  $p < .001$ , between the victim's sex and violence severity,  $F(1, 993) = 14.73$ ,  $p < .001$ , and between the batterer's sex, the victim's sex, and violence severity,  $F(1, 993) = 4.09$ ,  $p = .043$ . A detailed inspection of these interaction effects showed, first of all, that the case in which a man battered his wife was always perceived as more serious in terms of ODVS scores ( $M = 57.79$ ,  $SD = 5.15$ ) than when a woman battered her husband ( $M = 52.70$ ,  $SD = 7.80$ ), a man battered his husband ( $M = 53.66$ ,  $SD = 7.20$ ), or a woman battered her wife ( $M = 53.26$ ,  $SD = 7.30$ ),  $F(3, 1005) =$

28.53,  $p < .001$ . This was true regardless of whether the violence was less,  $F(3, 503) = 29.86$ ,  $p < .001$ , or more severe,  $F(3, 498) = 16.26$ ,  $p < .001$ . This further confirms Hypothesis 2.

Secondly, the scenarios where a man battered his husband or a woman battered her wife were not perceived differently by respondents in terms of the ODVS; neither in the less severe case,  $t(251) = .78$ ,  $p = .439$ , nor in the more severe case,  $t(245) = 1.57$ ,  $p = .119$ . Thirdly, the less severe scenarios where a man battered his husband ( $M = 50.07$ ,  $SD = 6.38$ ) and where a woman battered her wife ( $M = 50.69$ ,  $SD = 6.25$ ) were perceived as more serious in terms of the ODVS than the less severe scenario where a woman battered her husband ( $M = 47.74$ ,  $SD = 6.83$ ),  $F(2, 375) = 7.24$ ,  $p = .001$ . The combination of these results further confirms Hypothesis 3.

And finally, in the more severe case there were no significant differences in perception of the domestic violence between the scenarios where a man battered his husband ( $M = 57.28$ ,  $SD = 6.10$ ), where a woman battered her wife ( $M = 55.93$ ,  $SD = 7.38$ ), and where a woman battered her husband ( $M = 57.48$ ,  $SD = 5.30$ ),  $F(2, 374) = 2.22$ ,  $p = .110$ , further confirming Hypothesis 4.

In other words, violence in a heterosexual relationship where a man batters his wife was always considered the most serious case regardless of the level of violence. Further, violence in gay relationships was not perceived differently from violence in lesbian relationships. And finally, violence in gay and lesbian relationships was perceived as more serious than violence in heterosexual relationships where a woman batters her husband, but only when the nature of the violence was less severe.

### 3.2. Attitudes Toward Women, Lesbians, and Gay Men and Perceptions of Domestic Violence

The AWS ranged from 14 to 98, with higher scores reflecting more negative attitudes about women. The mean for the total sample was 23.59 ( $SD = 9.61$ ). The ATLG ranged from 6 to 42, with higher scores reflecting more negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians. For the ATLG, the mean for the total sample was 16.31 ( $SD = 8.37$ ). The means and

standard deviations for AWS and ATLG are given in Table 2, according to couple types. The AWS and ATLG were strongly and positively correlated,  $r = .487$ ,  $p < .001$ , while the ODVS was negatively correlated with both AWS,  $r = -.298$ ,  $p < .001$ , and ATLG,  $r = -.173$ ,  $p < .001$ . We performed a median split on both AWS and ATLG to transform them into categorical dummy variables and use them in ANOVAs.

To study the impact of attitudes towards women on perceptions of seriousness, we performed a 2 (respondent's sex)  $\times$  2 (batterer's sex)  $\times$  2 (victim's sex)  $\times$  2 (median divided AWS) ANOVA. First, the main effect of the AWS was significant,  $F(1, 993) = 38.60$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants scoring below the median of AWS considered the domestic violence significantly more serious ( $M = 56.04$ ,  $SD = 6.17$ ) than participants with AWS scores above the median ( $M = 52.75$ ,  $SD = 7.76$ ). Second, the interaction between the batterer's sex and the AWS was statistically significant,  $F(1, 993) = 6.03$ ,  $p = .014$ . Further inspection showed that this interaction was due to the fact that the significant difference in perceptions of domestic violence when the batterer was a male compared to when the batterer was a female decreased with increasingly negative attitudes about women. Participants with attitudes below the AWS median had a mean ODVS score of 57.64 ( $SD = 4.89$ ) and 54.25 ( $SD = 6.92$ ) when the batterer was a man and a woman, respectively, resulting in a mean ODVS difference of 3.39 units,  $t(491) = 6.33$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants with attitudes above the AWS median had a mean ODVS score of 53.72 ( $SD = 7.49$ ) and 51.89 ( $SD = 7.91$ ) when the batterer was a male and a female, respectively, resulting in a mean ODVS difference of 1.83 units,  $t(514) = 2.69$ ,  $p = .007$ .



**Table 2: Mean scores, standard deviations, and Ns for the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS) and the Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG) for participants in different conditions**

	Husband batters wife	Wife batters husband	Husband batters husband	Wife batters wife
AWS	<i>M</i> = 23.07	<i>M</i> = 24.19	<i>M</i> = 23.38	<i>M</i> = 23.72
	<i>SD</i> = 9.33	<i>SD</i> = 9.90	<i>SD</i> = 9.73	<i>SD</i> = 9.49
	<i>N</i> = 254	<i>N</i> = 255	<i>N</i> = 249	<i>N</i> = 251
ATLG	<i>M</i> = 16.53	<i>M</i> = 15.73	<i>M</i> = 16.35	<i>M</i> = 16.63
	<i>SD</i> = 8.92	<i>SD</i> = 8.03	<i>SD</i> = 8.11	<i>SD</i> = 8.42
	<i>N</i> = 254	<i>N</i> = 255	<i>N</i> = 249	<i>N</i> = 251

Note: The total scores for the AWS ranged from 14 to 98, with higher scores reflecting more negative attitudes toward women. Total scores for the ATLG could range from 7 to 42 with higher scores reflecting more negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians. There were no significant differences in AWS,  $F(3, 1005) = .63, p = 0.594$ , and ATLG,  $F(3, 1005) = .59, p = 0.623$ , across the different conditions.

A parallel analysis was conducted for attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. In a 2 (respondent's sex)  $\times$  2 (batterer's sex)  $\times$  2 (victim's sex)  $\times$  2 (median divided ATLG) ANOVA only the main effect of the ATLG was statistically significant,  $F(1, 993) = 19.03, p < .001$ . Respondents with less negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians perceived the domestic violence as more serious in all domestic violence cases ( $M = 55.49, SD = 6.54$ ) than respondents with more negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians ( $M = 53.17, SD = 7.69$ ). Hence, we found no support for Hypothesis 5 (that negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians would lead to lower seriousness scores for domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships than in heterosexual relationships).

#### 4. Discussion

In this experimental study from Sweden examining undergraduates' perceptions of domestic violence in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual relationships, participants were asked to read domestic violence scenarios which varied in terms of batterer's sex, victim's sex, and violence severity. Perceptions of seriousness constituted the dependent variable. In line with Hypothesis 1, the results of our study showed that female respondents perceived domestic violence as more serious than male respondents regardless of sex and sexual orientation of batterer and spouse. This difference in male and female respondents' perceptions of domestic violence was, however, larger in cases where the violence was less severe, supporting Hypothesis 4. Consistent with Hypothesis 2 and 3, the scenario where the batterer was a man was considered more serious than the scenario where the bat-

terer was a woman, and the scenario where the victim was a woman was perceived as more serious than when the victim was a man. Furthermore, closer inspection of the interaction effects related to violence severity and sex of batterer and victim revealed interesting patterns regarding perceptions of domestic violence. The case when a husband battered his wife was always seen as more serious than any other gender constellation, both in the less and more severe scenarios, further confirming Hypothesis 2. Domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships was perceived as more serious than violence in a heterosexual relationship where a wife battered her husband, but only in the less severe case, confirming Hypothesis 3 and 4. There were no differences in perceptions of domestic violence in gay compared to lesbian relationships (independently of violence severity). Finally, our results showed that negative attitudes toward gays, lesbian, and women were associated with lower seriousness scores irrespective of the gender constellation of victim and perpetrator. Thus, we found no support for Hypothesis 5.

Our results are in line with the prediction made on the basis of gender-role stereotypes. The domestic violence scenario that involved both a male batterer and a female victim was perceived as the most serious case regardless of violence severity. Also, as predicted, the domestic violence cases that involved at least a male batterer (gay couple) or a female victim (lesbian couple) were perceived as more serious than the case that involved neither a male batter nor a female victim (i.e. the case where a wife battered her husband). This was true at least in the less severe case of

domestic violence. These results are largely consistent with prior findings on gay, lesbian, and heterosexual domestic violence (Harris and Cook 1994; Poorman, Seelau, and Seelau 2003; Seelau and Seelau 2005; Seelau, Seelau, and Poorman 2003; Sorenson and Thomas 2009).

We found limited support for the competing prediction, based on prejudices against gays and lesbians, that domestic violence in gay and lesbian relationships would be perceived as less serious than domestic violence in heterosexual relationships. Although the case where a husband battered his wife was considered the most serious case, the fact that gay and lesbian domestic violence was considered more serious than the case where a wife battered her husband (in the less severe case) and the fact that the interaction effect between negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian people and sexual orientation of the couple was not statistically significant provides little support for the alternative prejudice-based hypothesis.

The prediction that female respondents would perceive situations as more serious than male respondents was supported in our data, confirming previous findings in the literature (Harris and Cook 1994; Home 1994; Pierce and Harris 1993; Seelau, Seelau, and Poorman 2003; Stalans 1996; Summers and Feldman 1984). We also found some support for the prediction that greater severity of domestic violence would reduce the differences in perceptions of domestic violence in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual relationships. First, differences across scenarios involving gays, lesbians, and a wife battering her husband disappeared in the more violent case. Second, sex differences in perceptions of domestic violence were smaller when the violence was more severe. One should, however, remember that the difference between the two levels of severity was quite large: two slaps versus a brutal beating. Our findings show that when violence and battering become very severe and brutal, various differences in perceptions found at the lower level of violence severity virtually disappear. This is true for all cases except for the one where a man batters his wife, which is always perceived as the most serious scenario.

There are some limitations to our study that need to be mentioned. First, the reader should bear in mind that 98

percent of our sample consisted of heterosexual individuals. Perceptions of domestic violence documented in this paper, therefore, reflect perceptions of heterosexual individuals. Second, the means of the seriousness measure were all at the high end of the response scale. This implies that while violence severity and the sex of respondent, batterer, and victim affected perceptions, respondents considered all scenarios as quite serious. Third, the means of both the attitudes toward lesbians and gay men scale and the attitudes toward women scale were at the low end of the response scale, which indicates that respondents in our experiment overall rejected negative statements about gays, lesbians, and women. This means that the perceptions of domestic violence reported here are based on a sample that overall had positive views of gay and lesbian people, held gender equality values, and reacted negatively to domestic violence. This might explain why we did not find support for Hypothesis 5 in our data. Fourth, this study was conducted with undergraduate students, which limits our ability to generalize our results to a broader population since a study's population can influence its conclusions (Sears 1986). Students differ, for example, in education, age, and attitudes from the rest of the population, which might affect perceptions of domestic violence. Finally, the very high scores on the ODVS and very low scores on the AGLS and the AWS may also indicate socially desirable responding.

Future studies should seek to circumvent the limitations of the current study. Experimental studies with samples more representative of the general population would be useful to determine the generalizability of findings based on undergraduate students. Moreover, studies on perceptions of domestic violence are often limited to the views of heterosexuals. Researchers should collect data that make it possible to examine differences in perceptions of domestic violence based on respondents' sexual orientation. Future studies should also examine findings from different countries with different laws, different acceptance of violence in heterosexual, gay, and lesbian relationships, and different attitudes toward gays, lesbians, and women. Finally, in the current study the abuse studied was physical, as is the case in most of the literature on domestic violence. Future work should therefore put some effort into examining perceptions of domestic violence involving psychological and sexual abuse.

## Appendix

Table A1: Information about participants by experimental condition

	Experimental condition				All participants
	Husband batters wife	Wife batters husband	Husband batters husband	Wife batters wife	
Female	55.9%	54.1%	58.6%	59.4%	57.0%
Single	45.7%	45.9%	45.4%	44.6%	45.4%
Parent	15.4%	17.3%	14.1%	13.9%	15.2%
Heterosexual	98.0%	97.2%	98.8%	98.4%	98.1%
Gay or lesbian	0%	0%	0.4%	0.4%	0.2%
Bisexual	1.6%	2.0%	0.4%	0.8%	1.2%
Other sexuality	0.4%	0.8%	0.4%	0.4%	0.5%
Victim	18.1%	21.6%	16.9%	21.5%	19.5%
Perpetrator	6.7%	6.7%	6.4%	6.8%	6.8%
Age	25.5 years	25.3 years	25.4 years	24.9 years	25.3 years
Number of participants	254	255	249	251	1,009

Note: Results of one-way ANOVAs showed no significant differences between participants in the different experimental conditions, implying a successful randomization.

Table A2: Items in the Opinion of Domestic Violence Scale (ODVS)

Item	Average score	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
How serious was the incident?	5.86	1.24
If you had witnessed this incident as a third person, how likely would it have been that you would have called the police?	6.16	1.82
How violent was this incident?	5.46	1.41
How responsible was the batterer for the incident?	6.72	0.73
The batterer's actions were justified.	6.62*	1.13
Overall how much do you sympathize with the batterer?	6.62*	0.97
How responsible was the victim for the incident?	6.47*	1.06
The victim suffered serious abuse from the batterer.	5.34	1.69
Overall, how much do you sympathize with the victim?	6.11	1.34

Note: *N* = 1,009. Range = [1, 7]. High scores indicate that respondents were more concerned and perceived the situation in the scenario as more serious. Asterisk denotes reverse coding.

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